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ABSTRACT

Community-based, or inmate-run, literacy programs are a significant alternative to literacy programs run by those outside the correctional institution. Such programs provide meaningful self-involvement and opportunity for the development of problem-solving skills for the inmates. Beginning in the spring of 1984, the Institute for the Study of Adult Literacy and the Literacy Council at the Huntingdon State Correctional Institution developed a program of inservice training for prison inmates who want to develop or strengthen their own community-based adult literacy programs. The National Institute of Corrections funded the series of six workshops to teach organizational dynamics; recruitment, selection, and training of tutors; maintaining tutor/member interest; student/tutor interpersonal relations; supplementary approaches and materials; and learning disabilities. A book of modules that contained step-by-step instructions and exercises was developed as well as a book of supplementary readings. The workshops were conducted by resource people outside the prison from December 1986 through June 1987. The inmates involved have responded positively to the favorable publicity they have received in the local and state news media and to the exposure their experience was given at state and national adult education conferences. This project should be followed up by refining the materials developed, devising a way to print them and disseminate them to U.S. and Canadian penal institutions, reinforcing the efforts of inmates who wish to replicate the Huntingdon experience in their own institutions, and pilot testing the model explicated in the two books. (CML)

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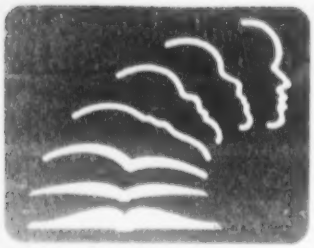

INSTITUTE FOR THE STUDY OF ADULT LITERACY

STARTING AND BUILDING A COMMUNITY-BASED LITERACY PROGRAM IN PRISON: A FINAL REPORT TO THE NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF CORRECTIONS

(Technical Assistance Grant
Project No.: VE-84-01)

December 1987

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THE NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF CORRECTIONS

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FINAL REPORT

Faced with conditions of severe prison over-crowding, as severely crunched budgets, and insensitive and apathetic legislators, prison administrators--as well as prison educators--in many cases find their hands tied with regard to the need to meet the educational needs and demands of their inmate populations. Any significant improvements in the provision of education opportunities in prisons, if they are to occur at all, must occur within the existing institutional and budgetary frameworks. Hence the significance of prison community-based approaches to education. Such approaches draw on the time, energy, leadership and other resources of the inmate community itself to plan and manage effective educational programming for inmates. Rather than having to devote scarce or nonexistent resources of the penal system to such approaches, the prison administration need only provide educational advisory and monitoring services and those can be provided without adding new staff positions or new line items on already constricted budgets.

That such approaches are possible--even in maximum security environments--has already been established by the experience of the Literacy Council at the State Correctional Institution at Huntingdon, Pennsylvania. The uniqueness of this program lies in the fact that both the administration and inmates at that

institution have dared to cross the grain of institutional apathy and the marginality of prison education to establish not only a fully operational literacy program, but one that is prison community-based. The administration has given its blessing to the idea and devoted time, energy and resources of the Education Department to support and advise. Inmate organizations have made and continue to make generous financial contributions for the purchase of texts and training. Scores of inmates have volunteered several hours per week to tutor their fellows and to provide leadership on the council.

In prisons, community-based or inmate-run literacy programs are a significant alternative to outside-run literacy programs. Although they do not offer illiterate inmates contacts from outside the walls, an inmate-run literacy operation offers distinctive advantages over non-inmate literacy councils. Specifically, a prisoner-run literacy program can provide opportunities:

* for formation by inmates of a perception of literacy not just as "their problem," referring to the inmates with low or negligible levels of reading and writing but, rather, as a problem which affects the entire prison community.

* for meaningful, selfless involvement of both individuals and other organizations within the entire inmate community.

* for establishment of meaningful non-suspect (by either the administration or other inmates) and mutually beneficial cooperation between prisoners and prison-keepers.

* for development in inmates of problem-solving skills in attending to meaningful prison community and literacy program-relevant problems.

* for creation of a literacy program which is not just an in-prison application of non-prison literacy council models, but rather one which is adapted from start to finish to the nature of prison structure and experience.

In the spring of 1984, Dr. Peter Cookson, Professor-in-charge of the Adult Education Program and Associate Director of the Institute for the Study of adult Literacy at Penn State, received a letter from the Literacy Council at the Huntingdon State Correctional Institution inviting the Institute's to lend technical assistance to the Council. After several visits by Ms. Avis Meenan, representing the Institute, Dr. Cookson accompanied Ms. Meenan in a visit with the Council where we agreed to plan a program of in-service training for the then still young Literacy Council. At that time there were no state (provincial) or federal funds to support such efforts. Accordingly, it was decided to request the National Institute of Corrections to provide funding for a series of workshops. The first draft of the proposal consisted of a list of 30 workshop topics. The list was then pared down to a workable number of six. Rather than conduct the workshops as merely a one-shot series, it was decided to capture the content of the workshops and, on the basis of that content, prepare a learning package which inmates in prisons across the U.S. and Canada could use (1) to start their own community-based literacy program and/or (2) to strengthen an existing literacy program.

From the start, the project was to be carried out collaboratively. Both the Prison Literacy Project Staff of the Institute for the Study of Adult Literacy, as represented by Dr. Cookson and staff member Ms. P. Carman, and the Literacy Council, as represented by the Board, were to be mutually involved in all

decisions regarding the implementation of the project plan. Accordingly, the proposal was submitted in March 1986. The project was funded and began in October. The topics chosen by the literacy council were:

1. Organizational Dynamics: Training in this area was desired to enable more effective utilization of prison resources, more effective implementation of human resources in tutoring programs, and improvement of operation of volunteer councils within the prison community.

2. Recruitment, Selection, and Training of Tutors: Because tutors are usually the most important part in the success of student's learning, it is important to provide optimal service. This training was to provide information on effective ways to recruit, motivate, and training tutors.

3. Maintaining Tutor/Member Interest: In order to most effectively develop a literacy program, it is essential to avoid attrition among tutors. Keeping them involved and motivated is an administrative skill that an inmate literacy council will need to develop.

4. Student/Tutor Interpersonal Relations: Training in this area is needed because of the importance of developing communication skills and understanding learner needs. This training was to help tutors to become more aware of and to be able to respond to the individualized and various needs of students.

5. Supplementary Approaches and Materials: The primary materials used by many literacy councils are the Laubach series. Although useful, the phonics approach is not adequate enough and must sometimes be supplemented by other materials. Because of the proliferation of materials, it is essential for tutors to be able to select ones that will maximize instructional techniques.

6. Learning Disabilities: Many inmates with low levels of literacy have been unable to master basic reading and writing skills in the past because of previously undiagnosed learning disabilities. Training was needed to equip tutors to effectively respond to the learning needs and styles adults with learning disabilities.

For each topic, there was to be a workshop, a book of modules, and a casebook of supplementary readings. The workshops

were conducted by resource people generally from outside the prison--from both university and other literacy council settings. The volume, Starting and Building a Community-Based Literacy Program in Prison: Six Modules for Inmate Instruction was designed so as to facilitate individual or group study leading to direct organizational intervention on the part of inmates in their own behalf. Drawing on the content of the workshops, the modules presented practical guidelines and step-by-step instructions for inmates to organize their own literacy council and/or reinforce an existing inmate-run literacy council. Besides the printed instructions, written exercises were provided in connection with each module. Too, excerpts of the workshops, together with several discussion questions and related learning activities were provided for each module. The companion volume, Starting and Building a Community-Based Literacy Program in Prison: A Casebook of Readings comprised chapters which provided detailed supplementary information corresponding to each of the modules. Individual chapters were written by a literacy council members, corrections staff, and other specialists from the U.S. and Canada to provide additional insights and ideas inmates could apply in the course of their volunteer literacy work.

The first of what were to become six workshops was conducted in December 1986. The final workshop was conducted in June 1987. Before, during, and after the first workshop, the literacy council board established a pattern which was followed for several of the other five workshops. They met before the work-

shop so as to specify their precise expectations for the presenter which they subsequently conveyed those expectations, sometimes in the form of questions, to the presenter. In post-workshop sessions, workshop participants discussed at length how the concepts presented might most profitably be implemented by the Literacy Council.

Not only has the project resulted in two highly informative books which can be used by inmates in county, state, and federal penal institutions, but the hands-on experience the project has provided working with the Prison Literacy Project Staff at Penn State's Institute for the Study of Adult Literacy in planning workshops and in planning and writing two volumes has had a most beneficial effect on the inmates themselves. The inmates have responded positively to the favorable publicity they have received in the local and state news media and in the exposure their experience was given at the statewide and national adult education conferences. According to reports by the Literacy Council officers, the entire organization has been strengthened. Individual inmates have increased their self-confidence and commitment to worthwhile and selfless service in behalf of their fellow inmates.

Looking to the future, there are several ways to follow up this project:

* A means should be devised whereby the 309 page book of modules and the 159 page casebook of readings can be printed and disseminated to county, state, and federal penal

institutions throughout the U.S.A. and Canada.

* Before they are published and disseminated, the materials produced in connection with this project need to be refined.
* The process which was initiated via this National Institute of Corrections Prison Literacy Project should continue. A second project can reinforce the efforts of inmates who wish to replicate the Huntingdon experience in their own institution.
* An effort needs to be mounted to pilot-test in a representative sample of penal institutions the model explicated in the two books produced in this project. On the basis of such pilot tests, further refinements to the instructional materials can be effected.